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Myth and Reality in the Poetry of Keki Daruwalla

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Abstract

This paper examines the interplay between myth and reality in the poetry of Keki N. Daruwalla, one of the most significant voices in post-independence Indian English poetry. Daruwalla's work is marked by a deep engagement with violence, history, and the complexities of human existence, often articulated through a powerful fusion of mythic and realistic elements. Unlike traditional poetic uses of myth as a source of transcendence or spiritual consolation, Daruwalla reinterprets myth in a critical and often ironic manner, placing it within the context of contemporary socio-political realities. Through close textual analysis and the application of myth criticism and postcolonial theory, this study explores how myth in Daruwalla's poetry functions as a framework for interrogating modern concerns such as violence, moral ambiguity, and historical continuity. The paper argues that myth and reality in his work exist in a dynamic tension, where myth does not resolve but rather intensifies the contradictions of the present. By reconfiguring traditional narratives within a modern context, Daruwalla creates a poetic vision that bridges past and present while exposing the limitations of both. Ultimately, his poetry demonstrates that meaning emerges not from the dominance of myth or reality, but from their continuous interaction.

Keywords: *Keki N. Daruwalla; myth and reality; Indian English poetry; postcolonial literature; myth criticism; violence; history; symbolism; modern poetry; cultural reinterpretation.*

1. Introduction

Keki N. Daruwalla occupies a significant position in post-independence Indian English poetry for his unflinching engagement with violence, history, and the complexities of human existence. Writing in a period marked by political instability, communal tensions, and disillusionment with nationalist ideals, Daruwalla departs from earlier romantic traditions and adopts a poetic voice grounded in realism and ethical inquiry. His poetry frequently turns to landscapes, historical episodes, and human conflict, presenting a world that is fragmented, uncertain, and often brutal.

One of the distinctive features of Daruwalla's poetry is his use of myth. Unlike poets who employ myth as a source of transcendence or spiritual reassurance, Daruwalla reinterprets myth in a critical and often ironic manner. Myth in his work is not an escape from reality but a lens through which reality is examined and questioned. Ancient narratives, symbols, and archetypes appear in his poetry, but they are placed within contemporary contexts where they acquire new meanings. In this process, myth loses its aura of sacred permanence and becomes a dynamic tool for exploring modern anxieties.

Daruwalla's poetic world is deeply rooted in reality one shaped by violence, political unrest, and moral ambiguity. Yet this reality is not presented in isolation. It is constantly juxtaposed with mythic references that both illuminate and complicate it. The interaction between myth and reality in his poetry creates a tension that

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is central to his artistic vision. Myth does not resolve the chaos of the present; instead, it exposes its contradictions and intensifies its ethical dilemmas.

This paper argues that Daruwalla reinterprets myth not as a source of escape but as a critical framework through which contemporary reality is examined. By placing myth alongside modern experiences of violence, history, and existential uncertainty, he transforms it into a means of questioning inherited narratives and revealing the complexities of the present.

2. Problem Statement

Although Keki N. Daruwalla's poetry has been widely studied for its engagement with violence, history, and political consciousness, relatively limited attention has been given to the dynamic interaction between myth and reality in his work. Existing criticism often treats myth as a secondary or decorative element, focusing instead on the poet's realism and his depiction of social and political conflict. Such readings, while valuable, overlook the deeper structural role that myth plays in shaping Daruwalla's poetic vision.

Myth in Daruwalla's poetry is not merely a reference to the past; it functions as an interpretive framework through which contemporary realities are examined. His poems frequently juxtapose ancient narratives with modern experiences, creating a dialogue between past and present. However, this relationship has not been sufficiently explored in critical discourse, particularly in terms of how myth is reconfigured to address modern concerns such as violence, fragmentation, and moral uncertainty.

The central problem addressed in this study is therefore to understand how Daruwalla uses myth as a critical tool to reinterpret reality. The paper seeks to examine whether myth in his poetry reinforces traditional meanings or challenges them by exposing their limitations in the context of contemporary experience. By focusing on this interaction, the study aims to provide a more integrated understanding of Daruwalla's poetic method and thematic concerns.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the use of myth in the poetry of Keki N. Daruwalla.
2. To analyze how myth interacts with contemporary reality in his poems.
3. To explore the reinterpretation of myth in a modern and postcolonial context.
4. To investigate the role of myth in representing violence, history, and moral conflict.
5. To understand how Daruwalla bridges past and present through poetic imagination.

4. Review of Literature

Critical engagement with Daruwalla's poetry has primarily emphasized his treatment of violence, political unrest, and historical consciousness. Bruce King identifies Daruwalla as a poet of "harsh realism," noting his ability to confront the brutal realities of contemporary society without resorting to sentimentality (King 187). Such readings highlight the poet's commitment to depicting social conflict and ethical tension, positioning him within a tradition of politically engaged Indian English poetry.

Another significant strand of criticism focuses on Daruwalla's use of landscape and imagery. Scholars have observed that his rivers, deserts, and urban spaces are not merely descriptive but symbolic, reflecting deeper psychological and historical concerns. These studies underscore his ability to transform physical settings into sites of meaning, where personal and collective histories intersect. However, while these analyses acknowledge the richness of his imagery, they often overlook the mythic dimensions embedded within it.

Theoretical perspectives on myth also provide useful insights into Daruwalla's work. Northrop Frye argues that myth forms the structural basis of literary expression, offering recurring patterns and archetypes that shape narrative meaning (Frye 136). Similarly, Claude Lévi-Strauss views myth as a system through which cultures organize and interpret experience (Lévi-Strauss 12). These perspectives suggest that myth is not static but adaptable, capable of acquiring new meanings in different contexts.

Postcolonial critics further emphasize the reinterpretation of myth in modern literature. In postcolonial writing, myth is often reworked to challenge dominant narratives and to articulate alternative perspectives. This approach is particularly relevant to Daruwalla, whose poetry frequently recontextualizes myth within contemporary realities.

Despite these contributions, there remains a gap in scholarship concerning the integrated study of myth and reality in Daruwalla's poetry. While critics have examined these elements individually, fewer studies explore how they interact to produce meaning. This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing how Daruwalla uses myth not as an escape from reality but as a means of critically engaging with it.

5. Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by a combination of myth criticism, postcolonial theory, and modern literary realism. These frameworks provide the conceptual tools necessary to analyze the interaction between myth and reality in Daruwalla's poetry.

Myth criticism, particularly as articulated by Northrop Frye, emphasizes the role of archetypes and recurring narrative patterns in shaping literary meaning. Frye suggests that literature draws upon a shared reservoir of mythic structures that transcend individual texts (Frye 136). In Daruwalla's poetry, mythic elements such as ritual, sacrifice, and heroic struggle appear in transformed forms, reflecting contemporary concerns rather than ancient ideals.

The anthropological perspective of Claude Lévi-Strauss further contributes to this analysis by viewing myth as a system of thought that organizes cultural experience. According to Lévi-Strauss, myths evolve over time, adapting to new social contexts while retaining their structural significance (12). This concept is particularly relevant to Daruwalla's poetry, where myth is reinterpreted to address modern realities such as violence and political conflict.

Postcolonial theory provides an additional framework for understanding how myth is reworked in a contemporary context. Postcolonial writers often engage with traditional narratives in order to question inherited cultural and ideological structures. In Daruwalla's poetry, myth is not preserved in its original form but reshaped to reflect the complexities of post-independence India.

Finally, the framework of modern realism underscores the poet's commitment to depicting the harsh realities of contemporary life. Daruwalla's poetry does not idealize experience; instead, it confronts violence, suffering, and moral ambiguity directly. When combined with mythic elements, this realism creates a tension that is central to his poetic vision. Myth and reality do not exist in isolation but interact dynamically, each reshaping the meaning of the other.

6. Myth as Reinterpretation of History

In the poetry of Keki N. Daruwalla, myth frequently functions as a bridge between past and present, enabling a reinterpretation of history through symbolic and narrative frameworks. Rather than treating myth as a static inheritance, Daruwalla reshapes it in ways that expose the continuity of violence and moral conflict across time. His poetic engagement with history is not merely documentary; it is interpretive, often filtering historical experience through mythic structures that reveal deeper patterns of human behavior.

Myth, in this context, becomes a means of questioning historical narratives rather than affirming them. Traditional myths often celebrate heroism, sacrifice, and divine order; however, when placed alongside modern realities, these narratives acquire an ironic dimension. Daruwalla frequently juxtaposes mythic motifs with scenes of contemporary brutality, thereby exposing the disjunction between idealized pasts and lived realities. This technique destabilizes the authority of myth as a source of unquestioned truth.

Moreover, the poet's treatment of history reflects a cyclical understanding of time. Violence is not confined to a particular historical moment but recurs across eras, suggesting that human conflict is embedded within broader patterns of existence. Myth, with its repetitive structures and archetypal narratives, becomes an appropriate medium for representing this continuity. As Northrop Frye suggests, myth provides a

framework through which recurring human experiences can be understood (Frye 136). Daruwalla adapts this framework to demonstrate that historical events are not isolated incidents but part of an on-going process shaped by power, conflict, and memory.

Through this reinterpretation, myth in Daruwalla's poetry does not glorify the past; instead, it interrogates it. By placing mythic narratives in dialogue with historical reality, he reveals the complexities of cultural memory and challenges simplistic understandings of tradition. Myth thus becomes a critical tool that enables a deeper engagement with history and its enduring impact on the present.

7. Myth and Violence: Deconstructing Heroism

A significant aspect of Daruwalla's poetic vision lies in his treatment of violence, which is often examined through the lens of myth. Traditional myths frequently celebrate heroic acts, presenting violence as a necessary component of valour and sacrifice. However, Daruwalla deconstructs this notion by exposing the brutality and moral ambiguity underlying such representations.

In his poetry, violence is rarely heroic; it is chaotic, destructive, and often senseless. By invoking mythic frameworks, Daruwalla highlights the contrast between idealized narratives of heroism and the harsh realities of modern conflict. The heroic figure, traditionally associated with courage and moral clarity, is replaced by individuals caught in situations of ethical uncertainty. This shift reflects a broader disillusionment with grand narratives that seek to justify violence.

The use of myth in this context is often ironic. Mythic references that once symbolized order and meaning are recontextualized to reveal disorder and fragmentation. This technique aligns with the postmodern tendency to question established narratives and to expose their limitations. As Claude Lévi-Strauss observes, myths evolve over time, adapting to new cultural contexts while retaining their structural significance (12). Daruwalla's poetry exemplifies this process by transforming myth into a medium for critiquing contemporary violence.

Furthermore, the cyclical nature of myth reinforces the idea that violence is not an aberration but a recurring aspect of human existence. By drawing parallels between mythic and modern forms of conflict, Daruwalla suggests that the patterns of aggression and domination remain largely unchanged. This perspective challenges the notion of historical progress and raises questions about the possibility of ethical transformation. Through his deconstruction of heroism, Daruwalla not only critiques myth but also redefines it. Myth becomes a site of tension where traditional ideals are confronted with modern realities, revealing the inadequacy of simplistic moral frameworks in the face of complex human experiences.

8. Reality as Fragmented and Harsh

While myth provides a symbolic framework in Daruwalla's poetry, reality remains grounded in the immediate experiences of violence, political unrest, and existential uncertainty. His poetic world is characterized by fragmentation, where coherence is disrupted by conflicting forces and moral ambiguity. This depiction of reality reflects the socio-political conditions of post-independence India, marked by instability and disillusionment.

Daruwalla's realism is unflinching. He does not attempt to soften the harshness of experience or to offer comforting resolutions. Instead, his poetry confronts the reader with images of suffering, decay, and conflict. This approach aligns with the broader shift in modern poetry toward a more direct engagement with reality, moving away from romantic idealization.

At the same time, the presence of myth complicates this realism. Rather than providing escape, myth intensifies the perception of reality by placing it within a larger symbolic context. The juxtaposition of myth and reality creates a tension that underscores the inadequacy of both frameworks when considered in isolation. Reality appears fragmented and chaotic, while myth appears insufficient to impose order upon it.

This tension reflects a deeper philosophical concern with the nature of truth. Daruwalla's poetry suggests that reality cannot be fully understood through rational analysis alone; it requires engagement with

symbolic and imaginative modes of understanding. Yet these modes are themselves unstable, subject to reinterpretation and critique.

Ultimately, Daruwalla presents reality as a space of unresolved contradictions. Myth does not resolve these contradictions but brings them into sharper focus. The result is a poetic vision that is both intellectually challenging and emotionally resonant, inviting readers to confront the complexities of the world without the reassurance of clear answers.

9. Mythic Symbols in a Modern Context

Daruwalla's poetry is rich in symbolic imagery drawn from myth, yet these symbols are consistently reinterpreted within a modern context. Rivers, deserts, rituals, and images of death recur throughout his work, functioning as both mythic and contemporary elements. This duality allows the poet to create a layered meaning in which the past and present coexist.

For instance, the river, traditionally associated with purification and continuity, often appears in Daruwalla's poetry as a witness to violence and decay. The sacred significance of the river is not denied but complicated by its association with modern realities. Similarly, deserts, which in mythic traditions may symbolize spiritual testing, become in his poetry spaces of political tension and existential emptiness.

Rituals and symbols of death are also reinterpreted. In myth, rituals often serve to establish order and meaning; in Daruwalla's poetry, they frequently highlight the persistence of violence and the fragility of human existence. The symbolic resonance of these images is thus transformed, reflecting the complexities of contemporary life.

This process of reinterpretation aligns with postcolonial approaches to myth, where traditional narratives are not simply preserved but critically examined. By situating mythic symbols within modern contexts, Daruwalla challenges their original meanings and reveals their continued relevance. Myth becomes a living system, capable of adapting to new realities while retaining its symbolic power.

Through this synthesis of mythic and modern elements, Daruwalla creates a poetic language that is both rooted in tradition and responsive to contemporary experience. His use of symbolism underscores the interconnectedness of past and present, demonstrating that myth continues to shape our understanding of reality even as it is reshaped by it.

10. Tension between Myth and Reality

The relationship between myth and reality in Daruwalla's poetry is not one of simple opposition but of dynamic interaction. Rather than privileging one over the other, the poet creates a space in which both coexist, each influencing and reshaping the other. This interaction produces a tension that is central to his poetic vision. Myth, in Daruwalla's work, often serves to illuminate aspects of reality that might otherwise remain obscured. By drawing upon familiar narratives and symbols, the poet provides a framework through which complex experiences can be understood. At the same time, reality challenges and destabilizes myth, revealing its limitations and forcing it to adapt to new contexts.

This tension reflects a broader epistemological concern with the nature of knowledge and understanding. Myth offers a symbolic mode of interpretation, while reality presents concrete experiences that resist simplification. Neither framework is sufficient on its own; together, they create a more nuanced perspective.

Importantly, Daruwalla does not attempt to resolve this tension. His poetry resists closure, leaving the relationship between myth and reality open-ended. This openness allows for multiple interpretations and reflects the complexity of the world he portrays.

The interplay between myth and reality thus becomes a defining feature of Daruwalla's poetry. It enables him to engage with both the symbolic and the material dimensions of experience, creating a rich and multifaceted poetic landscape.

11. Conclusion

The poetry of Keki N. Daruwalla offers a compelling exploration of the relationship between myth and reality, revealing how these two dimensions interact to shape human understanding. By reinterpreting myth within the context of modern experience, Daruwalla transforms it from a source of transcendence into a critical tool for examining contemporary issues.

The analysis demonstrates that myth in Daruwalla's poetry does not provide escape from reality but intensifies engagement with it. Through ironic reinterpretation, myth exposes the persistence of violence, the fragility of moral frameworks, and the complexities of historical continuity. At the same time, the harsh realities depicted in his poetry challenge the authority of myth, forcing it to adapt to new contexts.

This dynamic interaction between myth and reality reflects the broader concerns of postcolonial literature, where inherited traditions are reexamined in light of contemporary experience. Daruwalla's work exemplifies this process, offering a nuanced and critical perspective on the relationship between past and present.

Ultimately, his poetry suggests that neither myth nor reality can be understood in isolation. It is through their interaction that meaning emerges. By maintaining this tension, Daruwalla creates a poetic vision that is both intellectually rigorous and deeply reflective of the complexities of modern life.

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